

Chapter 13: An Unfinished Alternative: Towards a Relational Paradigm

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Abstract/Chapter Summary

In recent years, studies of desistance from crime – and of their implications for criminal justice practice – have begun to challenge ‘the risk paradigm’. That challenge has been cast principally in terms of the ways in which desistance can be supported (and therefore risk of reoffending reduced), with research suggesting, for example, the critical importance of motivation, relationships and social contexts in the human development processes associated with leaving crime behind. However, more recently, desistance research has begun to raise questions about the end point or destination implied: What comes after desistance? This chapter argues that a focus on social relations, trust and reciprocity is essential – both practically and normatively – to processes of change and to supporting them. That focus in turn requires the development of co-productive approaches to practice that take more seriously the lived realities of the struggle for change, and the experiential expertise of those engaged in that struggle.

Introduction

In the past two decades “desistance research” has emerged as a significant field in criminology and has (to a greater or lesser degree) caught the attention of British policymakers, probation and social work practitioners. Whether it has adequately informed policy and practice, whether it has been properly understood, is a moot point. Most discussions of what it means to desist begin with the idea of the cessation of offending behaviour. As such academic enquiry has sought to reveal the processes through which the transition from offending to non-offending occurs, what it entails, and how we might interpret what this means for penal policy and practice. In an exploration of the implications of desistance research for practice, McNeill (2006) identified a fundamental difference in emphasis between the dominant risk paradigm and the desistance paradigm. Whereas the risk paradigm, or at least its configuration as ‘what works?’ in policy and practice, focuses primarily on professional intervention, McNeill argues that ‘desistance-based perspectives stress that the process of change exists before, behind and beyond the intervention’ (McNeill 2012:13). Yet, with notable exceptions (i.e. Farrall et al 2010, Barry 2013a) our collective preoccupation with how change happens has, however, led us to neglect what happens *after* change occurs. Similarly, notwithstanding the adoption of a vocabulary of desistance, there is little evidence to suggest that policy and practice have progressed beyond existing emphases on personal or self-change (Barry 2013 a&b, McNeill 2012, 2014) to pursue the more challenging task of supporting social integration.

The structural impediments to social integration are multifarious and include ‘the economic (e.g. getting and keeping a job), the relational (e.g. rebuilding relationships with a spouse and family members after the shame of conviction) and the emotional (e.g. learning which social contexts will be accepting of ex-offenders, and which rejecting)’ (Farrall et al 2010: 548). Such analyses bring into view the lived realities of individuals’ struggle for change and the limitations of existing social policies and penal practices to impact the cumulative, structural disadvantages and obstacles to social integration experienced by many. While desistance research casts new light on the dynamics of the change process and on the means through which change might be supported, even desistance focused discourses of practice have focused either on what either the desister does or on what professionals do; what is missing is an appreciation and elaboration of the non-professional relational contexts of offending and desistance and how these contexts are suffused with concerns linked to the character and obligations of reciprocity in social groups. This underlines the need to attend to these relational contexts and to consider how these contexts might also shape and influence approaches to practice and, as part of that, inform the development of the kinds of assets and reflexive relational networks that can support not just desistance but social integration.

Such an approach requires us to move beyond the individualistic approaches that dominate not just community corrections but approaches to punishment and crime control more broadly. In an examination of the exercise of power and shifts in responses to risk in contemporary times, governmentality theorists have documented and analysed the retreat from welfarist, government-led, collective approaches to risk management and the provision of welfare and security to neo-liberal politics (Rose 1996). The individual is responsible for exercising choice in a prudential manner (see O'Malley 1992,1996); s/he is responsible for their own self-governance, providing for their own security and navigating and managing risks with the assistance of a plurality of independent experts and private businesses (see Robinson this volume?). This compound of autonomization, individualisation and responsibilization is manifest in a retreat from approaching risk as a shared concern, a retreat from the perspective of risk causation as a social phenomenon and a retreat from seeing the best defense against risk as located in collective solutions, characterized by Rose (1996) as 'the death of the social'. In turn, approaches to 'reducing re-offending' have become similarly individualistic and responsabilising, reliant on cognitive-behavioural, professionally-led interventions designed to manage and minimize the risks associated with offending (Barry2013). Indeed, Barry (2013: 349) argues that, for the most part,

'interventions ... are no longer about delivering justice *per se* but about what Rose (2000) describes as 'moralizing techniques of ethical reconstruction in the attempt to instil the capacity for self-management' (p.336)'.

The responsibility for change, then, is placed squarely on the individual as if their offending occurred freely and in isolation.

In echoes of Habermas' (1987) related argument about the colonization of the 'lifeworld'¹ by the 'system', Archer (2011) observes that the market exchange and political command relations that ensue from this state-market complex operate with an instrumental or systems rationality which has had the effect of fragmenting and disrupting human relations. We hold that the relational paradigm, advanced here, which is underpinned by a politics of fraternity (in the form of collective action, cooperation and mutual aid) (see Donati 2011) represents an alternative to the established 'risk paradigm', to the 'state-market binominal' (Donati 2015: 16). Indeed, there is increasing evidence of

¹ By 'lifeworld' Habermas is referring to the shared common understandings and values that develop through face to face contacts over time in various social groups, from families to communities.

the emergence of new social forms, of innovations in modes of governance, rooted in the 'the life-world', which is the work of civil society.

'...the emerging social forms are arising in those areas where the Market and State generate gaps ...[and these] discontinuities are coming about under the aegis of a new 'relational thinking' (Donati 2015: 17)

In progressing beyond, then, a focus on personal or self change, this chapter proceeds to elaborate the centrality of social relations in the desistance process to illuminate how and why a focus on social relations, trust and reciprocity is essential, both practically and normatively, to supporting social integration. We suggest that this focus in turn requires the development of co-productive approaches to practice that take more seriously the lived realities of the struggle for change, and the experiential expertise of those engaged in that struggle (Weaver, 2013a). We then present one 'unfinished alternative' (Mathiesen 1974) for co-producing change, in the form of a mutual-aid based group, whose underpinning principles might usefully inform the development of a diverse range of practices oriented to enhancing opportunities for social participation and integration.

Supporting integration: solidarity, subsidiarity and social reciprocity

Elsewhere, one of us has reported empirical findings exploring the role of a co-offending peer group in shaping and influencing each other's offending and desistance trajectories (Weaver and McNeill 2014. Weaver 2015). The study involved the analysis of the life stories of a friendship group of six men in their 40s who offended together in their youth and early adulthood to reveal the individual, relational and structural contributions to the desistance process², through an exploration of the relationships between these men (who once co-offended) and the wider social relations in which they individually and collectively participated over the life course. Where these relationships once contributed to their collective involvement in offending, these particular friends also supported each other, albeit to differing degrees and with different effects, to pursue constructive changes in their lifestyles.

In elaborating the means through which the group acted as a resource for enabling and supporting each other's process of change, this study showed how, for different individuals, these relations triggered reflexive evaluation of their priorities, behaviours and lifestyles. It was observed that one's

² What is provided here is a summary of some of the key themes emerging from the results. A full account of the methodology and results can be found in Weaver (2013a) and are available from the first author on request.

social networks can be a context that triggers this evaluative review through a process of comparing and measuring one's self against that of one's associates, refracted through the lens of 'the looking glass self' (Cooley 1922). In other words, people's perceptions of how they think other people see them can motivate the initiation of behavioural or lifestyle changes. It was similarly identified that individuals' observation of change in significant others also had the effect of triggering this process of personal reflexivity through an appraisal of *their* behaviour and how different they and their lives had become which motivated individuals to make changes in their own behaviours and/or lifestyles. The observation of change in their friends - with whom they had a fraternal relationship and shared experiences – enhanced their receptivity to their influence in the hope that similar outcomes could be achieved by them. Moreover, it was also observed that, as an outcome of a more relational mode of reflexivity, their commitment to the maintenance of these significant relationships motivated these individuals-in-relation to make reciprocal adjustments or modifications to their behaviours as a collective so as to respect and support each other's shifting lifestyle choices. While these friends responded differently to changes to their structural conditions³, they also provided each other with mutual support to change by sharing with each other their own experiences of trying to change and, in that sense, acted as guides to each other; they provided each other with practical and emotional support; and they shared their personal and social resources which included access to new social networks and employment.

Among these men, change was further enabled and facilitated through the reciprocal informal exchanges that take place between family and the social relations that manifest through work and (for some) faith and other civic groups. These relations do not cause, nor are they conditional on, behavioural change; social relations can only exert influence where the individual is receptive to that influence. What all these types of social relations have in common is that they all incorporate shared expectations of reciprocity that imply degrees of interdependency, manifest as mutual support. This notion of reciprocity or mutual exchange is central to Donati's (2011) conceptualisation of social relations. It is the engine, or what he terms, the 'generating mechanism of social relations', in that it is the practice of reciprocity that generates and re-generates the bond of the relationship, motivated by the maintenance of the emergent relational goods of trust, loyalty, confidence or caring for example. This reciprocal orientation is also the source of collective intentionality in larger groups.

³ The conditioning influence of the structural/cultural context works through shaping the situations of social relations and social actors; for example, influencing the accessibility of resources or the prevalence of beliefs that shape the situations in which people find themselves. This shaping operates such that some courses of action are impeded and discouraged, while others are facilitated and encouraged (Archer 2007; Donati 2011). The conditioning structures can also be understood as the sets of relational rules prescribing how one should behave towards others, according to the norms that the context prescribes; norms which the individual must negotiate reflexively and in a relational context (Donati 2011, Pers. Comm.).

Those social relations that are most causally influential in the desistance process are characterised by solidarity and subsidiarity, or in other words, a sense of 'we-ness' (Weaver 2013b). Put simply, subsidiarity is a way to supply the means or a way to move resources to support the other without making him or her passive or dependent but in such a way that it allows and assists the other to do what is required in accordance with his or her personal priorities. Critically, in the context of this discussion, subsidiarity cannot work without *solidarity* (sharing a common or mutual responsibility through reciprocity which implies interdependence and trust) (Donati 2009). In general terms, the manner of relating, characteristic of these relations of reciprocity, manifest as mutual helping performed in accordance with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, has much to offer in terms of informing contemporary penal practice 'beyond the risk paradigm'. The implication of this is that if correctional practice is to support desistance, it must extend far beyond its traditional concerns (i.e. with professionally led interventions focused on changing individuals) and into a deeper engagement with means and processes that enable the (re)connection of the individual to the kinds of assets and reflexive relational networks that can facilitate not just desistance but social integration. This implies re-establishing 'the circuit of social reciprocity' (Donati 2009:227) and in so doing, learning from the experiential expertise of those engaged in that struggle. Such an approach is in alignment with the aspirations of co-production (Weaver 2011, 2012).

Coproducing Change

Supporting social integration requires, at the very least, the building of and interaction with social and community networks to enable change and the mobilization of their resources in the development, delivery and innovation of penal practice (Weaver 2011, 2013c). Co-production is a term for such collaborative efforts, reflecting, in this context, the interdependent relationship between professional service providers, service users, and communities as co-producers in enabling change (Pestoff 2012).

Co-production as both a term and a concept is, however, beleaguered by different definitions, by disagreement about how it should be interpreted and operationalised, and by a limited empirical evidence base. Bovaird and Loeffler (2013) define co-production as '*the public sector harnessing the assets and resources of users and communities to achieve better outcomes*'. While this is somewhat operationally vague, and while it does not specify the contributions of the third sector, it retains an emphasis on reciprocity; it incorporates recognition of the relationships that exist between the various co-producers or stakeholders; it focuses on outcomes and not just services; and it encompasses an active role for both service users and for communities.

In seeking to explain the different dimensions of co-production, some academics have delineated typologies which distinguish between individualistic forms of co-production and group and collective forms (Brudney and England, 1983: 63–4 in Needham, 2008; see also Bovaird and Loeffler, 2008). Individual co-production produces outcomes that benefit the individual participants and this, according to Bovaird and Loeffler (2008), is presently the dominant co-productive strategy. This understanding of co-production, and its operationalization in practice, is more akin in many respects to ‘personalisation’ (in the form of increased personal choice and control across and within existing service provision) with an emphasis on supporting individual empowerment and self-help. By contrast, group forms of co-production denote a greater level of communication and collective involvement than individual forms, typically bringing service users together to shape or provide services, to differing degrees. An example of such an approach might be the custody and community councils⁴ run by User Voice (an ‘ex-offender’ led third sector organisation in England and Wales) or mutual and peer support groups. Collective forms are those strategies that ‘benefit the whole community rather than just groups of users’ (Needham, 2008: 224) and which include a diverse group of co-producers, for example, including community volunteers. Examples of such approaches could conceivably include Circles of Support through to more large-scale co-productive endeavours such as the Serenity Café⁵ (a recovery café and community hub run by and for people in recovery in Edinburgh). As Needham (2008) observes these different forms of co-production may be distinct categories in a conceptual sense, and perhaps in terms of scale and process, but not in terms of the outcomes or benefits that the different strategies potentially produce where we may find considerable overlap.

Slay and Stephen’s (2013:3) review of the literature on co-production in a mental health context identified six inter-related general principles that characterize co-productive practices:

1. Taking an assets-based approach: recognising people who use services as partners in designing and delivering services.
2. Building on people’s existing capabilities: moving beyond a deficit approach to one that provides opportunities to recognise and grow people’s capabilities and actively support them to put these to use at an individual and community level.
3. Reciprocity and mutuality: offering people a range of incentives to work in reciprocal relationships with professionals and with each other, where there are mutual responsibilities and expectations.
4. Peer support networks: engaging peer and personal networks alongside professionals.

⁴ See <http://www.uservoice.org/our-work/our-services/councils/>

⁵ See www.serenitycafe.co.uk

5. Blurring distinctions: between professionals and service users by reconfiguring the way services are developed and delivered.
6. Facilitating rather than delivering: enabling public service agencies to become catalysts and facilitators rather than being the main providers themselves.

While there are a number of illustrative case studies of co-productive community justice initiatives (see for example Graham and White, 2013), a recent systematic review of empirical research conducted by Voorberg et al (2013) concluded that across the literature, the objectives underpinning co-productive practices were rarely developed or articulated. Most studies seek to identify the influential factors - that is those factors that influence the process and practices of co-production on the organisational side and on the citizen/service user side. Resultantly, there is a dearth of systematic evidence on both the experience of co-production (Parrado et al 2013) and the effects of co-production – both in terms of the process⁶ of participating in co-productive practices and in the outcomes of co-productive practices, for organisations and for service users (Voorberg et al 2013). Voorberg et al (2013) conclude that, given this evidence gap, the impetus behind co-production often resides in its symbolic or normative value; put simply, it represents a virtue in and of itself. They advocate for further research into outcomes and the conditions or circumstances under and through which these outcomes occur (see also Parrado et al 2013).

Despite this gap in evidence, co-production is widely claimed to offer 'intrinsic benefits' for individuals (Carr 2004:8). Intrinsic benefits are those individual personal gains acquired through participation. These include, for example, gains in self-efficacy, self-esteem and increased social capital, factors which are also widely understood to be enablers to desistance. While intrinsic benefits are important, there is no significant evidence base testifying to the efficacy or otherwise of such processes in promoting change, enhancing social integration, or in substantially influencing service provision, policies or practice (Weaver and McCulloch 2012). This does not mean that that these changes and improvements are not occurring, just that they are not systematically evidenced.

Mutual Aid Groups: An unfinished alternative

The evidence base for co-production, let alone co-productive approaches to enabling desistance and social integration, is thus far limited and largely dependent on case studies. In similar vein, we discuss our experiences of supporting the development of a mutual aid group which we propose is

⁶ Arguably gains from participation in the process can be considered an outcome and in turn may influence perceptions of outcomes. Indeed, they may be interdependent.

one approach to ‘coproducing desistance’⁷ with the caveat that this approach has not, as yet⁸, been subject to empirical testing - although there is wider empirical evidence supporting the theoretical frameworks on which mutual aid is based (see particularly Steinberg 2014). Rather, in the spirit of Mathiesen’s (1974) concept of the unfinished, which refers to the provisional nature of all reformist strategies whose outcomes are, by definition, uncertain, it is our intention to encourage practitioners to be open to unfinished alternatives, to work imperfectly in transitional and unfinished reformist efforts that seek to alter the status quo: ‘The alternative is ‘alternative’ in so far as it is not based on the premises of the old system, but on its own premises which at one or more points contradict those of the old system... in terms of goals, or in terms of means together with goals’ (Mathiesen 2014:47-8); it has a distinct framework of understanding. An unfinished alternative is ‘an attempt to change the existing state of affairs through an intervention that is partial, incomplete and in process’ (McLeod 2013: 120). ‘The unfinished alternative emerges when we refuse ‘to remain silent concerning that which we cannot [yet] talk about’ (McLeod 2013: 121). We hold that the relational paradigm, rooted in the rationalities of civil society and, in that, underpinned by a politics of fraternity (in the form of collective action, cooperation and mutual aid) (see Donati 2011) represents such an alternative to the established ‘risk paradigm’, underpinned by the atomised individualism characterising contemporary society (see Robinson and McNeill, this volume). Here, then, we present an unfinished and alternative mechanism for co-producing change on the understanding that it alone is not sufficient to promote social integration but which, in our view, represents an alternative to existing arrangements and which might inform the development of innovative practices that seek to move ‘beyond the risk paradigm’.

As noted in Weaver (2013c), a desistance focussed and co-productive approach to working with groups may have more of an appreciative and collaborative, rather than correctional focus and should be oriented to facilitating the development of new supportive social networks. Mutual aid groups are one such approach. While mutual aid manifests in a range of peer-to-peer activity, mutual aid groups can also function collaboratively with practitioners in the public and voluntary sectors to co-produce support (Burns and Taylor 1998). In groups, mutual aid is premised on the reciprocal exchange of help; the group member is both provider and recipient of help for the purpose of co-producing mutual/collective and individual goals. In this sense, mutual aid is both a process and an outcome (Steinberg 2004). It is also underpinned by the co-productive principles for practice delineated by Slay and Stephen (2013) outlined above.

⁷ www.coproducingdesistance.org.uk

⁸ A cooperative, participatory evaluation research programme is scheduled to commence early in 2015

Mutual aid based groups can operate in a whole range of different ways -- single-session, short or long term, open or closed, small or large, face to face or through the internet (Steinberg 2004) - but they all prioritise and address the issues that matter to group members. The role of the worker is that of facilitator of learning in the mutual aid process in terms of 'not only helping people help themselves, but to help each other as well' (Schwartz 1976: 194). As group members 'become involved with one another, they develop helping relationships and become invested in each other and in participating in the group' (Gitterman 2006: 93). What is distinctive about this approach is that the sense of community and mutual support are co-produced in so much as 'the practitioner brings his or her expertise to the group, but so does every other participant in some unique way, and it is those areas of expertise that form the basis of mutual aid' (Steinberg 2014: 4).

Developing a sense of community is critical to the success and longevity of a mutual aid group. 'Only through a sense of community or we-ness will members come to acknowledge and accept one another as potential sources of help' (Steinberg 2014: 4). This sense of community is enabled and encouraged, particularly in the early stages, by the identification of a shared purpose or common cause that connects members' individual goals through a collective purpose (Steinberg 2004), which in our experience (discussed below), can change in the life course of a long-term group with its changing membership or in accordance with the changing needs of the group.

Another distinctive feature of this approach is the emphasis placed not just on outcomes but on processes of engagement and their impact on those engaged. There is some evidence to suggest that mutual aid based groups can generate social capital and enhance feelings of individual and collective self-efficacy (Mok, 2005; Parsons et al., 1998; Riessman et al., 1993; Simon, 1994). Further benefits of participation include: reinforcement of personal learning; social approval and acceptance, a sense of meaning, purpose and accomplishment; and improved self-worth and self-esteem (Burns and Taylor 1998) - all of which are crucial to the desistance process (i.e. Barry 2006, Farrall et al 2011, Maruna and LeBel 2009, Perrin and Blagden 2014). Being part of such a group can also offer a vital source of hope and encouragement, of advice and guidance, and an opportunity for both sharing and learning.

As previously discussed, mutual aid groups can enable the development of the kinds of assets and reflexive relational networks that can facilitate not just desistance but social integration. Maruna and LeBel (2009:66), for example, suggest that when a person is voluntarily involved in a helping collective, he/she is 'thought to obtain a sense of belonging', or solidarity, through the 'sharing of experience, strength and hope', which is both a fundamental strength of mutual-aid collectives and critical to their success. In turn, successful reintegration efforts need to foster a "we" feeling and a

“strong sense of belonging to one group” (Cressey 1995:118 quoted in Maruna and LeBel 2009:64). Moreover, there is some empirical evidence to suggest a positive relationship between generativity, help-giving behaviours, advocacy and desistance (LeBel 2007, 2009); 'research suggests that engagement with helping behaviours can send a message to the wider community that an individual is worthy of further support and investment in their reintegration' (Maruna and LeBel 2009:69). Engagement in generative, mutual-aid and advocacy behaviours could, then, help to mitigate some of the stigma and exclusion that many experience, help to augment or maintain a person's pro-social identity and help to support people's social integration.

The Thistle Mutual Aid Group (MAG)

The Thistle MAG, named by its members, stands for *This Hand Is Support Through Learned Experience*, although the group is usually referred to by its members as 'The MAG'. The idea of the MAG was informed by the study reported on earlier in the chapter (Weaver 2015) and its early development was underpinned by the work of Steinberg (2004), an expert in mutual aid based group work.

The MAG meets weekly in the community facilities of a local church hall; we wanted to create an informal environment that was both conceptually and physically distinct and distant from a criminal justice social work office. The MAG, which is a long-term, semi-open group, is supported or 'facilitated' by two criminal justice social workers (one of whom is the second author) and includes ten service users. There is also a satellite support team comprising four other social workers and the first author – but increasingly, families of participants are also engaging in certain group activities and are highly supportive of the MAG. In this sense, the MAG is a truly co-productive initiative, not least in terms of its democratic approach; all decisions about the group are made by the group.

Gary: There's no order of charge... nobody claims rank or throws down authority⁹.

On paper the MAG members are considered to be at high risk of re-offending and are generally classed as 'hard to reach' service users. The ages of the members, all of whom are male¹⁰, range from 26-54 and all of them have a substantial history of persistent offending primarily comprising violent and drug related offending for which many of them have served long term prison sentences.

⁹ The quotes in this chapter come from interviews conducted by a member of the Thistle MAG, Garry Friels, who, along with the interviewees, has kindly given his permission for their inclusion here. This informal peer-to-peer or 'cooperative inquiry' was undertaken approximately six months into the establishment of the group to explore what was working, why and how to inform its continuing development.

¹⁰ This is a gender specific group to enable men to explore the issues that matter to men.

Across the MAG, members are dealing with considerable challenges which variously include physical and mental health issues, addictions, the psychological and social effects of years in prison, and the effects of contemporary welfare reforms, inadequate housing, long term unemployment and poverty.

The original members were carefully selected by the facilitators and satellite supporters¹¹ on the basis of similarity and difference to and from each other, in terms of age, offending histories, stages of change and personal characteristics. This is because we learn from people we can identify with but also we learn from people who are different to us, who have different views, different experiences and different ways of doing things (Steinberg 2004). The members worked with the social work facilitators and satellite supporters on an individual basis before coming together as a group. In these semi-structured individual preparatory sessions, informed by Steinberg (2004), facilitators communicate the techniques and principles of mutual aid, the mutual aid culture and process, while exploring individual strengths and aspirations for the group.

Participation in the group for both facilitators and members¹² is entirely voluntary and this has been critical in shaping the relational dynamics and the character of the relationships between everyone involved. Everyone is there on an equal basis – there is no one person in charge – and this has engendered a real sense of inter-dependency, a genuine sense of shared concern for each other, and an intense bond between everyone involved and this sense of community and co-ownership is what makes it distinct from other groups in criminal justice.

Donald: I've never come across a group like this – in other groups there's always people not bonding and there's always something whereas this one, everyone is on the same level. We all know what we want to do... [and] being with all the boys, we're all gelling together and its helping people. We're all just trying to better ourselves.

Gary H: Its excellent here. It's the interaction with people. I can be who I am here.

Colin: It's given me so much confidence and I've met a whole group of new people and I'm getting more involved in things.

¹¹ The membership of the original group has altered slightly since its inception in December 2013 to include some new members; the selection and recruitment of members is now undertaken by the MAG members.

¹² As per Slay and Stephen (2013) the distinction between workers and members has since blurred and we would all consider ourselves members, rather than facilitators, members or satellite supporters, with reciprocal commitments to the group and with shared roles, responsibilities and expectations.

Kathleen (social worker): The guys themselves set their own agendas. It's not prescriptive, there's no specific topics that have to be covered. It's the guys' group. They decide what they are going to be talking about. There's no taboo subjects; it's open and honest discussion.

As Kathleen suggests, another distinctive feature of the MAG is that the issues that matter to and that are identified by members are prioritised and to date these have included a diverse range of topics including but not limited to masculinities, parenting, experiences of imprisonment, managing relationships, managing and overcoming addictions, inequality, stigma and discrimination. The MAG is united by a common cause, or a shared focus, which is about supporting each other with life after prison. Having this common objective is a basis for developing a sense of identification with each other, it encourages members to take ownership of the group, and it opens up lines of communication. Sharing experiences, aspirations, and challenges; supporting each other, never judging each other and being there for each other – these are the values and qualities that have led to a sense of community and co-ownership on which the ethos of the group – if not the group itself - depends.

In The MAG, members use their own experience, what they know about themselves, to shed light on the issues that other members bring up and to help them reach their own decisions about what might work for them. We work on the understanding that members do not have to agree with each other's ways of thinking, being and doing. We don't have to agree with someone to 'get' where someone's been – or where they are coming from. All that is being asked is that group members try to understand each other. For many of the members, it is just liberating to be able to discuss things that they have long felt a need to talk about and didn't have the chance to.

Gary: I learned a lot off you [the other MAG members] and can take advice off you. That's what I look forward to. As much as I have a hard week like everyone else when I come here I can lay it all out on the table, get support from the rest of the boys. It's a safe haven. I don't need to get uptight – I can actually sit, share my problems, whatever, have a chat with the group and off load, be at ease, and I don't feel under pressure.

Garry: The MAG is a place I can go and offload any of the challenges I've faced during the week without being judged. I was recently released from prison and it can be very daunting, stressful and it can seem at times there is no light at the end of the tunnel. I naively thought that getting released from prison meant my troubles were over but they were only just

beginning. If it wasn't for the support element of the group, I would have struggled. There is other support out there but so much of it is disjointed and invisible. Some people feel like they've got nowhere to turn.

In addition to, or as an extension of, the mutual aid meetings, the MAG is a forum for sharing personal and social resources and for providing each other with different forms of practical help and one of the members has recently established a closed online space for members to engage out-with the weekly meeting. As a group, we also participate in social activities and events together, which to date have included going to a stand-up comedy performance at a local arts centre, going out for meals in the local community, a day trip to a nearby island, and forming a regular five-a-side football team that competes against other teams and community groups, organising. We also hosted a five-a-side fundraising football event including 16 teams comprising a range of criminal justice professionals and service user groups; the event raised funds for our local neo-natal unit.

What the group ultimately becomes, what shape it takes, is for the members to decide. What seems to be emerging, which we had not expected, is the fact that not only does it have benefits for the members, everyone involved has learnt so much about the possibilities and potentials of a different way of working and a different manner of relating with each other. It has had a knock on effect for how the practitioners involved work with, communicate and relate to other people who use services and it has given all of us a renewed sense of why we came into the job.

Allan: The MAG motivates me, it inspires me and it reminds me of why I went into social work in first place – to assist and help people improve their situations and I feel as if the group in a lot of ways has allowed me to contribute to that.

Karen: I am seriously invested in this group as a participant and if you are going to be involved in it you have to leave that part of your [professional] role – not entirely – at the door, you can't do that obviously, but it's definitely about breaking down traditional barriers. You are the same as me; we just lived different lives. I know for a fact my life could have gone down a similar path so we can't judge, we need to get to know people. As social workers, we'll talk about relationships but what's that when you're sat behind a desk with a bit of paper?

Gordon: We have a lot of policies and procedures [in criminal justice] to follow – that will never go ...but I think we can do more of what we are doing just now and build on the Thistle MAG group to try and show that there's something a wee bit different we can try and do for people.

Concluding comments

As previously suggested, and as Karen infers above, it is this relational WE, the 'we-in-relation' (Donati 2014:171), that has much to inform not just *how* we support people but the *nature* of that support. Engaging and working alongside others in relation with whom these relational goods can emerge can provide a relational network within and through which constructive aspects of people's identities and characters can be reinforced and a sense of belonging and recognition can be established. We are not suggesting that mutual aid groups are the only way nor are they sufficient to support desistance and social integration - nor is this kind of approach right for everyone. The MAG may not be transformative in the sense of overcoming the structural impediments to social integration and mitigating the lived realities of struggle not only to change but to be accepted after one has changed – but it is a space in which acceptance is given and recognition of those realities afforded and it can ameliorate the pains of re-entry. We are suggesting, therefore, that the principles of solidarity, mutuality, and subsidiarity (and the manner of relating they imply) can inform a range of practices that can enhance social integration (see, for example, Weaver and Nicholson 2012). At the very least, this implies the need for services to become more relationally informed, more community facing and more community engaging in the recognition that, like people, communities have assets and networks that can enable and support change and social integration. Local communities are often a neglected resource and yet they have so much to offer service users either as volunteers or in terms of using the various groups on offer or even just in terms of attending local events. Participating in these activities can offer a sense of structure to an otherwise unstructured lifestyle, and provide opportunities to develop new relationships or vocational experiences. It is these less visible resources that inhere in civic groups that can add to the repertoire of resources and networks that service users can access and enables them to participate more fully in the life of their communities.

To conclude, we continue with a plea made by Weaver (2011). In standing between the pillars of reform and revolution – a position which Mathiesen (1974, p. 23) warns carry risks of being respectively 'defined in' by the current system and therefore neutralised or 'defined out' as

‘irrelevant’—our task as practitioners is to defy being defined by any one position; to resist the pressures of working only for short-term goals that may be more ameliorative than transformative; to commit to being part of an ever-unfinished process of learning, but always on the way, cumulatively, towards a higher ideal of transformative change. In this vein, ‘let clients take as their point of departure reforms which are closest to them and will change their lives now’ (Cohen, 1975, p. 93). In so doing, as practitioners, we should work at what is close at hand but always in the openness of the unfinished, and in the direction of that which supports solidarity and integration.

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